JUVENILE & FAMILY COURT JOURNAL

NCJFCJ est. 1937 NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JUVENILE AND FAMILY COURT JUDGES WWW.NCJFCJ.ORG

Changing How the System Responds to Status Offenders: Connecticut's Families with Service Needs Initiative

By Stephanie Bontrager Ryon, Lindsey Devers, Kristin Winokur Early, and Gregory A. Hand

ABSTRACT

Concerned by the number of status offenders in secure detention and the processing of noncriminal behavior through the juvenile and family courts, Connecticut began efforts to reform their approach to troubled and troublesome youth in 2005 (Weithorn, 2005). Between 2005 and 2007, Connecticut enacted a series of legislative changes to both improve services for troubled youth and Families with Service Needs (FWSN), and achieve systematic reforms for processing status offenses. At a systems level, the reforms sought to divert non-criminal behaviors from formal court processing and prevent secure confinement for status offenders who violated court orders related to their behavior. Connecticut's attempt at second-order, or system change, is the focus of this outcome evaluation.

In an effort to address the use of secure sanctions when dealing with status offenses, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) of 1974 tied federal grant funding to new rules designed to eliminate the detention or confinement of juveniles for non-criminal behaviors. This statutory deinstitutionalization of status offenders (DSO) requirement recognized both the inequity of incarcerating juveniles for non-criminal behavior and the harm that resulted from widespread use of this sanction. Instead of detaining or confining juveniles for non-criminal activities such as running away from home or truancy, states were encouraged to address these problem behaviors through mental health services, community-based programs, and family-focused interventions.

Families with children who engage in risky behaviors such as running away from home, truancy, sexual activity, and general disobedience of family rules often turn to state-operated

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Stephanie Bontrager Ryon, Ph.D., Senior Research Analyst with the Justice Research Center in Tallahassee, Florida, has nearly 15 years of research experience and four years of collective experience in the Florida criminal and juvenile justice fields. Correspondence: sbontrager@thejrc.com

Lindsey Devers, Ph.D., is a Senior Research Analyst with the Justice Research Center. She is an onsite consultant for the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.

Kristin Winokur Early, Ph.D., is the Vice President of the Justice Research Center. She was recently appointed to the Florida Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention State Advisory Group.

Gregory A. Hand, B.S., is the Director of Data Management for the Justice Research Center. He has more than 15 years of experience with database management and analysis.

Acknowledgments: This project was funded by the State of Connecticut Judicial Branch, Court Support Services Division.

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education, prevention, diversion, and health programs to help address troubling, non-delinquent behaviors (Shubik & Kendall, 2007). In Connecticut, status offenders and their caregivers are defined as Families with Service Needs (FWSN). "In state fiscal year 2006-2007, over 4,000 children were referred to the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters for what are known as status offenses" (FWSN Advisory Board, 2008, p. 5). This number represented one-third of all cases processed by Connecticut's juvenile probation unit, and many of these youth were formally disposed through the courts and/or placed in secure detention for non-delinquent activities. Connecticut judges were not, however, violating the DSO requirements of the JJDPA. Rather, the Act was amended in 1980 to recognize the exception of youth detained as a result of violating a valid court order (VCO) that prohibited them from engaging in status offending behaviors, such as running away or school truancy. The VCO exception undermined deinstitutionalization efforts (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2012).

Connecticut recognized the need for systemic changes to keep troubled youth from undue justice system involvement, confinement, and exposure to more serious offenders (Bontrager, Winokur, & Devers, 2010). Beginning in 2005, a series of legislative, policy, and procedural changes were enacted to address the number of status offenders processed by the Connecticut courts, the number of non-delinquency cases resulting in secure confinement, and the lack of community-based services for FWSN cases. This article begins with a brief overview of the Connecticut FWSN Initiative and expected changes to the system and concludes with an empirical assessment of how the initiative has impacted status offender processing.

THE CONNECTICUT FAMILIES WITH SERVICE NEEDS INITIATIVE

Prior to 2007, Connecticut status offenders and FWSN cases were commonly routed through the court system. According to the Connecticut Court Support Services Division (CSSD), the courts processed roughly 4,000 FWSN complaints every year before 2007. Many FWSN cases involved status offenses such as habitual truancy, running away from home, and general disobedience. CSSD noted that roughly 25% of FWSN complaints involved juveniles with significant risk factors who were increasingly engaging in deviant behaviors. Using the courts in these cases often resulted in secure placements and served as an entry point into the juvenile justice system (FWSN Advisory Board, 2008).

Connecticut Public Act 05-250, enacted in 2005, established that children who violate FWSN orders could not be committed to secure detention facilities. The law did not go into effect until 2007 so that procedures and programming could be developed for FWSN cases. In 2006, P.A. 06-188 amended this legislation and created the Families with Service Needs Advisory Board, which was tasked with managing the implementation of services associated with P.A. 05-250. The Advisory Board worked closely with CSSD and other state agencies, and together they recommended another set of legislative and policy changes. These reforms (P.A. 07-4) included court diversion for all status offenders and assessment and service referrals for all FWSN cases.

In addition to policy and procedural changes, the initiative included a programmatic component. The original service delivery plan included funding requests for four primary interventions: Family Support Centers, respite services, collaborative referrals processing, and pilot implementation of a Practical Academic Cultural Education (PACE) program in Waterbury. Only part of this request was approved in the state budget for state fiscal year (FY) 2006-07. The funding allocation permitted the implementation of four Family Support Centers and reallocation of respite beds to FWSN-involved juveniles (the PACE program and the remaining six Family Support Centers were not funded).

Through these new policies and programs, Connecticut hoped to lower the overall number of FWSN referrals coming into the system, keep status offenders out of secure detention, eliminate court involvement for non-criminal family matters, and improve outcomes for troubled and troublesome youth. The current research set out to evaluate the impact of these legislative changes on the Connecticut juvenile justice system and youth outcomes.

METHODS

This evaluation examined the effect of the FWSN Initiative on four system-level indicators: the number of FWSN complaints; the number of FWSN referrals with a subsequent detention placement; the number of FWSN cases without subsequent referral, arrest, adjudication, conviction, or FWSN charges; and the number of judicially processed FWSN complaints. The assessment included official youth, program, and justice system data from the CSSD Case Management and Information System (CMIS). CMIS records demographic, delinquency referral, placement, detention, disposition, adjudication, and risk and needs information for every youth in the juvenile justice system. Criminal arrest and conviction data were obtained from the Connecticut Computerized Criminal History (CCH) records system. The system-level assessment included all FWSN complaints made during fiscal years 2006-09.[1]

System-level outcomes were operationalized as: (1) the total number of FWSN complaints filed during the study timeframe; (2) the percentage of FWSN complaints with a subsequent detention placement for non-criminal behaviors during the study timeframe; and (3) the percentage of FWSN complaints formally processed by the courts during the study period. FWSN case outcomes included a six-month follow-up period[2] and were measured with three constructs: (1) the percentage of cases with a juvenile adjudication or criminal conviction; (2) the percentage of cases with a juvenile referral or criminal arrest; and (3) the percentage of cases with another FWSN complaint.

The program assessment incorporated the following analytic techniques: descriptive statistics and chi-square analysis. The descriptive statistics demonstrated the baselines, such as the total sample (and percentage) of FWSN cases with a subsequent referral, arrest, criminal conviction, juvenile adjudication, and FWSN complaint within six months. These simple statistics highlight the impact of the initiative on the juvenile justice system.

1 The federal fiscal year (October 1 through September 30) is used for this evaluation.

2 All cases were followed for six months from the time of the initial FWSN referral in measuring each of the three outcomes.

TABLE 1
FWSN Referrals 2006-2009

Total FWSN Referrals FY 2006-07	3,521
Other or Supervision Cases	3,521
Total FWSN Referrals FY 2007-08	2,102
FSC Cases	250
Other or Supervision Cases	1,852
Total FWSN Referrals FY 2008-09	2,062
FSC Cases	374
Other or Supervision Cases	1,688
Total FY 2006-09 Sample	7,685
Total October 1, 2006-April 1, 2009 Sample	6,816

The combined CMIS, CDCS, and CCH data provided demographic, risk, offense, and re-offending information for all FWSN complaints filed from October 1, 2006 through September 30, 2009. The final sample composition is presented in Table 1 for all FWSN referrals made during the study period.

Connecticut courts received 7,685 FWSN complaints between October 1, 2006 and September 30, 2009. Of those, 4,164 FWSN referrals were filed in fiscal years 2007-09. During this time, approximately 15% of all FWSN complaints received Family Support Center services. Of the 7,685 referrals, 6,816 were made between October 1, 2006 and April 1, 2009. These FWSN complaints comprised the system-level outcome sample.[3]

As depicted in Table 2, the FWSN complaint sample was comprised of roughly equal proportions of males and females with a mean age of 13.6 years. The majority were minority youth with an average of just over three charges prior to the FWSN complaint, with few having had a prior adjudication (average of 0.64). Youth who did not receive Family Support Center services had a somewhat higher prior charge and adjudication seriousness index than those referred to centers. Minorities comprised a higher proportion of FWSN cases referred to Family Support Centers than those not receiving these services.

FINDINGS

Public Acts 05-250 and 07-4 were intended to reduce the overall number of FWSN complaints and limit judicial involvement in FWSN cases. The legislation also prohibited placement of FWSN youth in secure detention facilities and sought to improve outcomes for all Families with Service Needs. The initiative service component was designed to provide effective community-based interventions for at-risk families. The outcome evaluation focused on how the new policies, procedures, and programs associated with this legislation impact status offender processing through the system and system involvement six months after initial FWSN referral.

3 Selecting complaints made between October 1, 2006 and April 1, 2009 allowed for a standard six-month follow-up for all cases.

TABLE 2
Descriptives System-Level Sample

FWSN Complaints October 1, 2006-April 1, 2009 (N = 6,816)	*Mean*	*Std. Dev.*	*Non-FSC FWSN (N = 6,331)*	*FSC FWSN (N = 485)*
Age at first offense	13.63	1.76	13.62	13.69
Gender (0 = Female, 1 = Male)	0.54	0.50	0.54	0.52
Race (0 = Other, 1 = White)	0.30	0.46	0.31	0.15
Prior charge seriousness index	5.56	9.71	5.61	4.95
Prior adjudication seriousness index	7.31	11.75	7.39	6.09
Total charges before program	3.21	3.36	3.23	2.98
Total felony charges before program	0.29	1.28	0.30	0.22
Total misdemeanor charges before program	0.89	1.88	0.90	0.82
Total adjudicated charges before program	0.64	1.74	0.65	0.44
Juvenile referral within six months of program	0.09	0.28	0.08	0.09
Juvenile felony referral within six months of program	0.27	0.44	0.27	0.26
FWSN referral within six months of program	0.05	0.23	0.05	0.07
Juvenile adjudication within six months of completion	0.13	0.34	0.13	0.13
Referral/arrest within six months of completion	0.29	0.46	0.29	0.29
Adjudication/conviction within six months of completion	0.14	0.35	0.14	0.14

System Level Changes

Public Acts 05-250 and 07-4 were designed to bring about a fundamental change in the processing of status offenders by the juvenile justice system. The policies and procedures mandated by this legislation encouraged at-risk juveniles and families to address their needs by using existing resources, such as community-based providers and the education system. The new policies also sought to eliminate detention placements for FWSN referrals, drastically reduce the number of judicially processed FWSN complaints, and decrease the number of FWSN cases with further justice system involvement. The system-level analysis compares FWSN referral information from fiscal year 2006-07, which preceded implementation of the Families with Service Needs Initiative, to data from fiscal years 2007-08 to 2008-09, the period after enactment of the new policies. The comparison allowed for examination of the effect of new procedures for processing FWSN complaints.

A primary goal of the Families with Service Needs Initiative was to divert troubled and troublesome youth from the courts and direct them to resources outside of the juvenile justice system. A total of 3,521 FWSN complaints were filed by parents, schools, and community organizations in FY 2006-07. After Public Acts 05-250 and 07-4 were fully implemented in October 2007, the number of FWSN complaints declined sharply. In fiscal years 2007-08 and 2008-09, there were 2,102 and 2,062 FWSN complaints respectively (see Figure 1), which represents a 41% drop overall in the number of FWSN complaints. These findings are consistent with another analysis of system-level reform by the Vera Institute (Mogulescu &

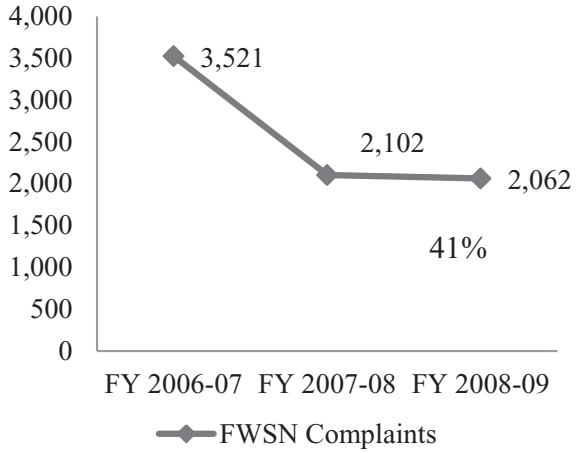

FIGURE 1. FWSN Complaints Fiscal Years 2006-09

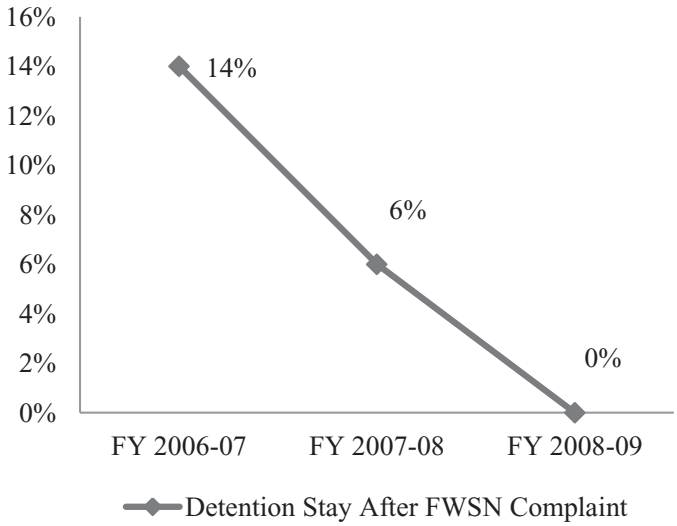

FIGURE 2. FWSN Detention Placement Fiscal Years 2006-09

Caro, 2008). The Vera Institute study reported a 41% change in FWSN-type petitions for a similar intervention (the Person In Need of Supervision initiative) in New York (Mogulescu & Caro, 2008).

The FWSN Initiative also targeted the placement of status offenders in detention facilities. As shown in Figure 2, in FY 2006-07, 14% of FWSN youth had a subsequent placement in detention.[4] In FY 2008-09, no FWSN youth were confined to a secure detention facility. In comparison, New York's Persons in Need of Supervision program reported a 39% decrease in non-secure detention placements for status offenders (Mogulescu & Caro, 2008).

4 The analysis excludes FWSN complaints with subsequent delinquency charges, as the detention placement could legitimately be linked to a delinquent offense.

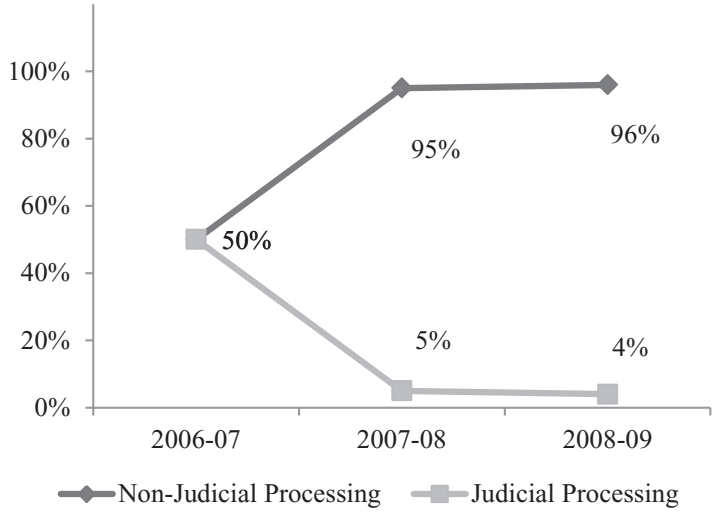

FIGURE 3. FWSN Processing 2006-2009

Another objective of Public Acts 05-250 and 07-4 was to limit the number of FWSN cases handled by the courts. The new procedures dictated that FWSN referrals should be processed by probation officials, with only the most serious complaints requiring judicial involvement. Examination of FWSN referrals between October 1, 2006 and April 1, 2009 (Figure 3) showed that the courts' involvement in handling complaints declined from 50% to 4% in two and a half years. This trend is in sharp contrast to national figures. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention estimated that nationally the number of "petitioned status offense cases processed by juvenile courts increased 29% between 1995 and 2005" (Puzzanchera & Sickmund, 2008, p. 71).

In addition to diverting FWSN cases from the juvenile justice system, limiting judicial involvement in processing these cases, and reducing the number of FWSN complaints with detention placements, the new procedures also focus on improving outcomes for all at-risk juveniles and their families. The analysis of 6,816 FWSN complaints from October 1, 2006 through April 1, 2009 (Figure 4) shows improved aggregate outcomes for all cases since the implementation of the FWSN Initiative.

The assessment demonstrated that in two and a half years, the percentage of FWSN complaints with a subsequent referral or arrest declined from 32% to 26%, a statistically significant reduction (chi-square 20.812, $p < .001$). As shown in Figure 5, in FY 2006-07, 1,122 FWSN clients had a subsequent referral or arrest within six months of the initial complaint. Two and a half years later, the number of FWSN cases with a subsequent referral or arrest was 305, a decline of 73%. These results compare favorably to a Florida Department of Juvenile Justice evaluation of the Children and Families in Need of Services (CINS/FINS) program, in which approximately 30% of youth completing the program had a referral or arrest within six months of program release (Winokur et al., 2006).

The number of FWSN cases with a subsequent adjudication or conviction likewise dropped, from 566 in FY 2006-07 to 139 in 2008-09. During this period, the percentage of

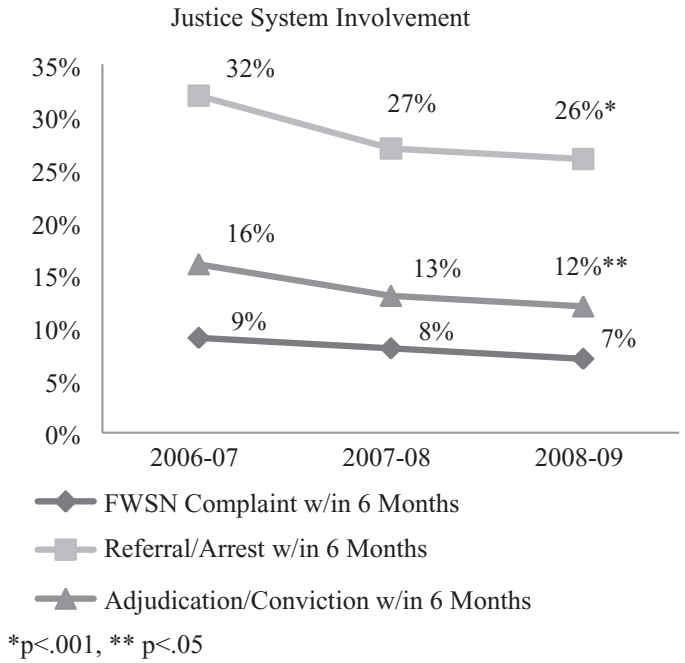

FIGURE 4. FWSN Outcomes (Percentages) 2006-09

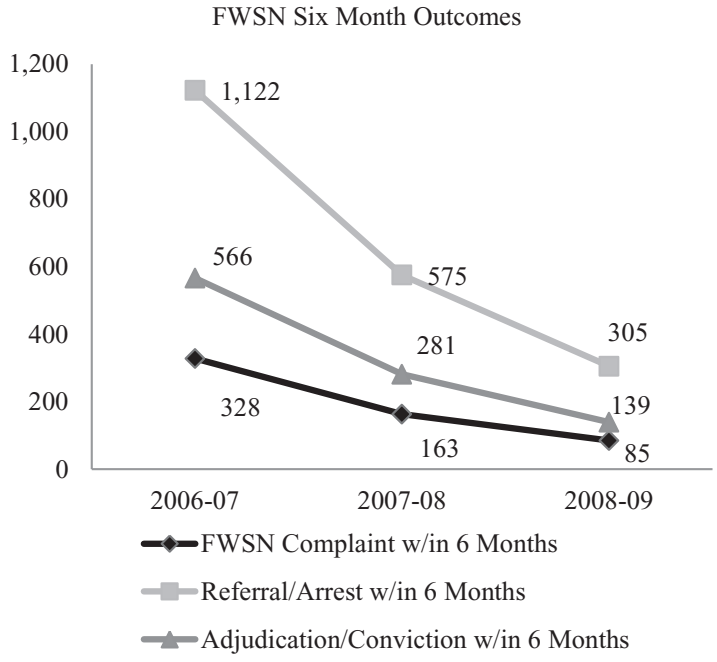

FIGURE 5. FWSN Outcomes 2006-09

FWSN complaints with a subsequent adjudication or conviction within six months of referral decreased from 16% to 12%, a statistically significant change at the 0.05 level (chi-square 7.478, $p = 0.02$). In context, researchers found that 10% of Florida youth who completed CINS/FINS services had an adjudication or conviction within six months of exiting the program (Winokur, Blankenship, Hand, & Greenwald, 2009). The number of cases with a subsequent FWSN complaint also declined slightly from 9% to 7% during the same period. While this final comparison was not statistically significant, the percentage of juveniles with a subsequent FWSN complaint improved over time.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Families with Service Needs system-level analysis focused on several key indicators, including the number of FWSN complaints and judicially processed FWSN referrals, FWSN referrals with a subsequent detention placement, and the number of FWSN complaints with a subsequent referral, arrest, adjudication, conviction, or FWSN referral. System-level analyses demonstrated that the FWSN Initiative substantially reduced the number of FWSN complaints and the number of non-criminal offenders processed by the courts, as well as eliminated the placement of status offenders in detention facilities and improved outcomes for FWSN youth.

Assessing program and system-level outcomes is a critical component to effective intervention for at-risk youth and their families. An American Bar Association report on status offender intervention highlights the importance of research on "the effectiveness of programs that provide pre-court diversion services to decrease recidivism rates and costs and increase the level of services available to families in crisis and case outcomes for status offenders placed out-of-home or in secure detention compared with those who receive in-home family services" (Kendall, 2007, p. 6). This evaluation provides a substantive contribution to understanding how status offenders are processed by the system and how initiatives to improve system functioning influence this process and case outcomes.

The study design (post-test only) does have limitations. Without randomized methods and/or proper control, it is impossible to conclude that the FWSN Initiative was solely or primarily responsible for the system changes. Other policies or procedures may have played a role in the dramatic reduction in FWSN referrals, court involvement with status offenders, and secure confinement for non-criminal behaviors. The current data do not allow for more sophisticated modeling to determine the exact impact of the FWSN Initiative on the handling of troubled and troublesome youth in Connecticut. In addition, the research examined the efforts of only one state—Connecticut. Only a few studies, conducted in Florida and New York, report on how legislative and agency efforts influence the processing of status offenders, and data for those states were not available for this analysis. The results presented here are not without limitation, but they do provide useful information for policy makers who grapple with the issue of status offenders and their families. Further, the results show that states can divert youth from formal justice system involvement and improve outcomes for troubled and troubling youth.

Future research should examine the cost effectiveness of policy changes and delve further into the services available for status offenders. In addition, efforts should be made to collect additional outcome information to include out-of-home placements and justice system involvement for all status offenders. Such efforts may involve developing data-sharing agreements across multiple agencies as status offenses cut across education, justice, and welfare systems. Finally, a comprehensive assessment of status offender policy should include information at the federal, state, and community levels. These research efforts are needed to ensure consistent evaluation of services for status offenders and their families, and to help monitor changes in system demand, functioning, and outcomes.

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